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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000799

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM-DESIGNATE SINIORA BEGINS CABINET  
FORMATION; LET THE HORSE-TRADING BEGIN

REF: A. BEIRUT 780

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 770  
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 766  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 747  
[1](#)E. BEIRUT 733  
[1](#)F. BEIRUT 724

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Following President Sleiman's May 28 nomination of PM Siniora to head the next government, Siniora will begin the difficult process of cabinet formation. The slight margin of votes in his favor is sure to encourage the opposition, which accuses him of being the "American" and not a consensus PM, to extract as many concessions as possible. While the complicated horse-trading involved in cabinet formation makes it difficult to predict who will emerge victorious, we do not see Round Two of the Doha process proceeding nearly as quickly nor as smoothly as the election of President Sleiman. We expect Round Three -- formulation of the ministerial statement to parliament, including the government's position on Hizballah's arms -- to be even more contentious. End summary.

#### THE LONG ROAD TO CABINET FORMATION

[1](#)2. (SBU) On May 28, President Michel Sleiman held binding consultations with the various parliamentary blocs to nominate the prime minister of the next cabinet after the majority chose Fouad Siniora to reassume the post of premiership. 68 out of 127 parliamentarians nominated PM Siniora to form the new cabinet (as opposed to 126 out of 128 votes he received when he was designated as PM in July 2005).

[1](#)3. (SBU) All of the March 14 blocs voted for Siniora, with vote tallies as follows: Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces (5), Walid Jumblatt's Democratic Gathering (17), Saad Hariri's Future Movement (32), and the Tripoli bloc (4). Other independent parliamentarians who voted for Siniora were Ghassan Tueini, Boutros Harb, Nayla Mouawad, Samir Franjiyeh, Solange Gemayel, Robert Ghanem, Michel Murr, Mosbah Ahdab, Elias Atallah and Jawad Boulos.

¶4. (SBU) While the Shia bloc represented by Amal movement and Hizballah cast &blank8 votes, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic movement and the Zahle popular bloc of MP Elie Skaff nominated different candidates for the premiership, including former Minister of Industry Leila Solh, Transportation Minister Mohammad Safadi, and MP Bahije Tabbarah. The Armenian Tashnaq party also cast blank votes. Others who cast blank votes or voted against Siniora were: Hussein Husseini, Nader Sukkar, the SSNP bloc, the Syrian Baath, Usama Saad, Bahije Tabbarah (who voted for Hariri), Pierre Daccashe (who voted for Bahije Tabbarah) and Alawite MP Mustafa Hussein.

¶5. (SBU) PM-designate Siniora began the process of cabinet formation on May 29 by first consulting with former PMs, as protocol dictates, and will begin consulting with parliamentary blocs on May 30. According to the Doha agreement, the cabinet will be comprised of 30 ministers, 16 for the majority, 3 for President Sleiman, and 11 for the opposition (a blocking third).

¶6. (SBU) Under the Taif agreement, half of the cabinet members are Christians, and the other half Muslim. The Christians are divided as follows: 6 Maronite, 4 Greek Orthodox, 3 Catholic, 1 Armenian, and 1 other minority Christian (Protestant, Syriac, etc.). The Muslims include 6 Sunni, 6 Shia, and 3 Druze. The four "sovereign ministries" (Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, and Finance) will be the most hotly disputed, with Justice a close fifth.

¶7. (SBU) After the consultation process (which many are

BEIRUT 00000799 002 OF 003

predicting could last weeks or more), Siniora, along with President Sleiman, will issue a decree forming the new cabinet. Once formed, the cabinet must agree, by two-thirds majority, on its general policy statement ("bayan wizari"). It then submits the statement to parliament within thirty days in order to obtain the vote of confidence, which requires a simple majority (64 out of 127 parliamentarians -- in 2005, the Siniora cabinet obtained 92 out of 128 votes).

#### REACTIONS

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¶8. (C) The March 14 decision to nominate PM Siniora prompted swift reactions from the opposition. Ali Hamdan, press advisor to Speaker Berri, said that the national unity government (NUG) was the second step in the Doha process, after the election of the president. Hamdan said the selection of Siniora was the majority's choice, but added that the NUG was a partnership, and the opposition fully expected to have its fair share. Shia MP Yassine Jabber, from Berri's parliamentary bloc, explained the bloc had cast blank votes because it was inappropriate for it to support Siniora since it did not have a good relationship with him over the last two years; however, the bloc was ready to participate in the new government.

¶9. (C) Alain Aoun, member of General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), told us that the FPM was unhappy with Siniora's nomination for the premiership. Aoun MP Ibrahim Kenaan also labeled Siniora's a negative signal; explaining that his bloc had hoped to "turn a new page" after the Doha conference, but instead the majority had selected the "American candidate." Hamdan later joked that Michel Aoun himself was happy with the decision; if Aoun, who represented the majority of Lebanon's Christians, could not be president, then Hariri, who represented the majority of Lebanon's Sunnis, should not be prime minister.

¶10. (C) Armenian opposition Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradonian said that although Tashnaq disagrees with the majority's decision, it refrained from nominating an alternative candidate out of respect for March 14's decision. Hizballah also refrained,

with MP Mohamad Raad explaining that the Doha agreement stipulated that the prime minister would head a national unity government and should therefore represent the traits of national unity. The Lebanese people are looking for a prime minister with a "positive attitude," he said.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) The narrow margin in favor of Siniora this time around compared to 2005 reflects the deep divide between the majority (who all voted in favor) and the opposition (who all either abstained or voted for a different candidate). Siniora, leader of what the opposition claims was an "illegitimate" government following the resignation in November 2006 of six opposition ministers (including all five Shia), is loathed by the opposition, which does not view him as a "consensus" prime minister. However, the Shia opposition, by refraining from nominating an alternative candidate, is playing along for the time being, most likely in hopes of extracting concessions in terms of cabinet portfolios.

¶12. (C) The horse trading over portfolios is in full pursuit, and all bets are on and rumors abounding. Laest thinking is that President Sleiman will keep Interior for himself, as well as possibly Defense. March 14 is angling for Finance (the purse strings) and Justice (Special Tribunal), both of which are key objectives for Michel Aoun. The wily Murrs would like Interior, which will play an important role in the run-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections, but at the same time would like to keep the younger Elias as Minister of Defense. Foreign Affairs is largely ignored by most, and presumed to go to the Shia.

¶13. (C) To complicate matters even more, there may not be a neat division of the six Sunni ministers for the majority and the six Shia ministers for the opposition. (Note: In the last Siniora government, all of the Sunni ministers were in

BEIRUT 00000799 003 OF 003

the majority, while all the Shia ministers were with the opposition. End Note.) This time, March 14 may take an independent Shia (to avoid an entire confessional bloc from resigning as occurred in 2006), and in exchange March 8 will take a Sunni. Other confessional distributions may also cut across majority/opposition lines. We can only hope PM Siniora has a sophisticated computer program to sort this all out.

¶14. (C) The only thing we can say for sure at this point is that we expect Round Two of the Doha agreement will be a lengthy process, and more contentious than the Round One election of President Sleiman. If and when there is a new cabinet, Round Three will be even more bruising, as the opposing sides seek to reach agreement on the ministerial statement, and in particular the wording regarding Hizballah's arms. Doha was but the beginning of what will be a long and difficult road to restoring political stability in Lebanon. End Comment.

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